## Challenges in multicultural teamwork -students’ experiences and perceptions

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**Abstract**

Mutual learning among scientists and practitioners about complex, societal problems is an essential element of transdisciplinary processes. As such transdisciplinary processes may serve capacity building among all participants (Scholz and Steiner 2015). When people from different countries or cultures collaborate an extra layer of complexity is added to this mutual learning and capacity building. These people bring in their own, often culture based style of learning and collaborating which challenges the actual collaboration and learning that takes place in the group. To get a better understanding of these challenges and the way students deal with these challenges, we set up this research at a Dutch University with a lot of international students. We investigated the experiences of Higher Education students while collaborating and learning in multi-disciplinary and multi-cultural teams. This study aims to (i) identify which issues and challenges these students experienced, (ii) identify the strategies students developed to cope with these challenges, and, (iii) assess whether these challenges and coping strategies can be related to differences in cultural background.

The research consists of three phases. In the first phase, 60 reflective journals of students of a course on Intercultural Communication Skills are analysed, issues identified and consequently coded using the Template Analysis (Frambach, 2014). In these reflective journals students are expected to report about issues they observed in cross-cultural situations, either at the university, in daily life or during a stay abroad. Students also have to analyse their experience and describe how they coped with the cross-cultural incident. In the second phase 120 reflection papers of students collaborating on a sustainability issue in a multi-disciplinary and multi-cultural group (one group consists of 30 students with about 12 different nationalities) in an intercultural setting are analysed, using the codes earlier identified. These students didn’t have a specific training about intercultural communication and were instructed to report specifically about their experiences in their group work. In the third phase, data are analysed to answer the questions: (i) Do students of different cultural backgrounds report on different issues and challenges? and (ii) Do students of different cultural backgrounds provide different interpretations of these issues and challenges or propose different strategies to solve these? We expect to find differences in perception and coping strategies between students from countries with high or low scores on collectivism, using Hofstede’s dimensions to make a distinction between countries. Findings will yield guidelines for instructors and team coaches to facilitate team work in cultural diverse groups and to enhance the learning effects.

**References**

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